



BARBARA MCDONALD, SCULPTOR



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Many of you have asked for some more information about Barbara's approach to her art and how she creates it. We interviewed the Artist to see what we could learn that might be of interest to people who enjoy her artwork. Here is the result for your reading pleasure.

By the way, if you have any questions of your own, just use the **Contact Us** button and ask us.

What strikes you when you suddenly realize that you want to explore a new idea for a piece?

I want to get to the studio to test it out! I don't drop everything to do it. It just stays on my mind until I can get something started and figure out if I'll be able to translate the idea into metal.

How would you finish this sentence: "I want to show/depict/express..."?

What artists usually want to express, i.e., the things that move me. Since I was a small child, I have had an inexplicable yearning for the stars and places beyond. I think it is inexplicable because it seems strange to long for something you've never seen. Sometimes, I feel as if I actually have seen these cosmic-scapes. I have seen them in dreams. When I cut the steel and paint the backgrounds, I am responding to those internal images. If I am able to achieve something that equates to the internal image, it's almost like a sympathetic vibration in music. Something in me responds with a joyful hum. If I can't achieve it, I remain dissatisfied, even if the work comes close.

What do you enjoy most about working in this medium? about creating your artwork?

It's difficult to separate the two. I get a burst of joy when I watch the plasma cutter through my goggles. The sight of the blinding bright light carving the steel arouses a deep satisfaction and I sometimes suppress an impulse to chuckle as I watch the patterns emerge. But creating the artwork involves more than just the cutting process. I actually get deep enjoyment from almost every aspect of it. I even enjoy preparing the boards with gesso, although this is a relatively mindless activity in comparison with the other aspects of the work.

What about your artwork or the process you go through brings you special joy?

Even though I am, theoretically, the artist and in charge of the creative process, I find that this work has so many lovely surprises for me as I go along that it is highly entertaining. When I achieve an unexpectedly beautiful effect, or when the colors develop even more brilliantly than I had imagined it's a source of pure joy.

What is there about creating these pieces that you are so passionate about?

I don't actually know. The passion rises when I'm doing them, but, when I'm not, there's just a mild itchy feeling. I came to this medium rather late in life. The creative urge has always been there and it has been exercised in many other ways. This medium of expression has proved to have more of a fund of joy than some others, but the reason is elusive.

What are some examples of "ah-ha!!!" moments/insights that happened to you while creating your various pieces?

There is something atavistic about working with the plasma cutter and the welders. I find myself thinking of iron-age humans and what it must have taken to discover ways of turning raw ore into hard steel. I imagine those early iron and steel-workers feeling some of the satisfaction I feel in just working with the material. My thoughts range from contemplating distant stars ready to go Nova to wondering at the satisfaction we humans get from our pitiful efforts at creation.

What makes you laugh? cry? while you are creating one of your art pieces?

When you are dealing with this sort of process, the impulse toward laughing and crying is often very close together. I feel like laughing, almost crying, when I am conscious of my own, perhaps disproportionate, emotional intensity while I'm working. I feel like laughing at myself. But the sense of tapping into a creative fund that is not of my own construction is very strong. I could be drawing creative energy from a molten puddle in middle earth, given that intensity.

You have said that there is a relation between your work and fractals. What are fractals? What is the link as you see/experience it?

"Fractals are the place where math, science and art come together. They visually demonstrate the relationships between disparate parts of the universe; they demonstrate the

interdependence of all things in nature. They allow us to view the complexity of chaos and order. They please us visually and excite our imaginations.” Kelleen Elizabeth Farrell

I think of fractals as a rough *visual* equivalent of atoms, but fractals and atoms are different. A fractal is a *visual* building block – a shape; atoms are *actual* building blocks. [I find it worthy of note that you can observe a fractal quite easily, whereas the *actual* building block, the atom cannot be observed without special equipment.] To me, fractal geometry unlocks one of the mysteries of how harmonic design is achieved.

Many artists speak about the advantage of “painting loosely.” It would seem that your approach almost requires an equivalent approach, but using very different kinds of “brushes.” Tell us more...

I freehand the designs with the plasma cutter. Sometimes I am less satisfied with the result than others. However, when it is working well, it’s very akin to writing free verse. The design flows and attains attractive movement. When you’re drawing, painting or cutting metal, sometimes the shape or placement of one line dictates the shape or placement of the next. Any design is a form of arrangement. So, as with arranging flowers, for example, the arrangement is assembled bit by bit, in relation to other bits.

You have described the settings that you portray as being “ambiguous.” Tell us more about what you mean.

I don’t recall using the word, but it has a ring of accuracy about some of my pieces. I have one, for instance, that strikes some people as depicting a fanciful underwater scene and others as depicting a fanciful scene in outer space. The fact is that if you pursue the principles that inform organic patterns of life-forms, you’ll produce results that could easily occur by evolution. As a result, patterns will emerge that are not strictly intentional nor totally unintentional.

One person may interpret the pattern in a totally different way from another, a little like the drawing that looks like two faces in profile or, in the blink of an eye, an urn. Either interpretation is accurate but whether a person perceives one or the other, or recognizes both alternatives may depend on the state of mind of the viewer.

What are some of the challenges in using this new medium (“impasto painting” in metal with plasma cutter and mig welder)?

There are many challenges to this medium – not least of which is the challenge of producing fluid design with hard steel. Further, this is work that could be dangerous if a person is not careful. In some sense, this kind of metal work involves “playing with fire.” It has much of the same fascination. It can be difficult to see the work with precision, given the imperative to wear goggles that steam up or a welding helmet that protects your sight from the damage you could incur from the intensity of the light but that also limits visual perception. This requires a great deal of care and deliberation.

As I gained experience, I was better able to achieve deliberate effects. But when I first started doing pieces like these, I often discovered, wholly by accident, that I could produce a beautiful effect by doing something in an unorthodox way. A lot of the things I find beautiful are actually the result of something a machine shop professional would think is “imperfect.” I’m attempting to achieve something very different from what a professional in that field seeks.

What are you experimenting with that we might see in the near future?

I am very interested in the way that metal behaves when you use a plasma cutter. With different techniques, you can cut or carve. You can cause lines to attain texture on their edges. You can fuse metal to metal, as you are cutting. The creative possibilities are very broad.

I also love the colors the steel takes on when it is heated. The effects are very beautiful, and the tints produced by the heat prove very harmonious, one to another. I have some steel pieces that I carved that cooled with lovely tints of silver blue and rust. It’s fascinating that the tints are natural complementary colors that emerged from the steel when it was exposed to very high temperatures.

What do you hope people will “get” from seeing one of your pieces?

I just hope they enjoy what they see. I’d like the steel images to stimulate their senses and I’d like them to see the unplumbed depths of an undiscovered universe.

What can you say about how you approach the conceiving/designing a piece?

Even if I have an idea for a new piece, I rarely plan out all the details. Sometimes, the emerging pattern seems to acquire a significance beyond what I had been thinking. I’ll alter the design if I think of an improvement as I’m working. If you aren’t open to seizing those artistic opportunities, I think there is a tendency to fall into predictable patterns. Then the work loses originality and energy and may become bland.

Sometimes, after carving out what I intended, I find that the leftover pieces suggest other scenarios. When you are using this technique of employing organic shapes, even the negative space assumes a life of its own. It’s one of the more gratifying side effects of this work – that it assumes a life of its own, not unlike the characters novelists describe. Many, if not most, novelists will describe how a character led the novelist, rather than the other way around. I consider it one of the more entertaining aspects of the creative process, that even such “dumb” material as hard steel can spark a dialogue with the artist who is manipulating it.

Do you create preliminary sketches or drawings of your pieces before you start working with the metal?

It is rare for me to do preliminary sketches, but I have, on occasion, drawn a figure before cutting it. The vast majority of my work is freehand using an intuitive, even “opportunistic” approach.

Do you play music while you are creating your pieces? If so, tell us more...

I usually have music in the studio while I'm working, although sometimes I have to use sound deadening methods, ear plugs or muffs to protect my hearing. I find a Narada CD of the French Impressionists is particularly good music for this work. However, my choices range from Beethoven's piano concerti to the track from *Band of Brothers*, to a favorite chamber quintet playing arias for woodwinds, to Jason Vieaux's CD of guitar music of Spanish composers. [You might notice that I favor instrumental over vocal music.] The thing about music is that it can adjust the listener's rhythms to rhythms that harmonize with the work. So the choice of music varies with the activity of the listener. For cutting steel, I want something with a smooth, calm flow. I would choose different music for other activities.

You are a musician and, early on, were a creative writer. Do you find any particular connection among these creative passions?

I haven't looked for connection, but I imagine there are connections. Creative endeavors do have areas of correspondence. To a significant degree, music, writing, and visual art are all capable of altering the mood of the perceiver. Each of them has a particular way of drawing out an emotional effect. But this isn't something that I have chosen to analyze right now.

What artists (and other sources) have most influenced your work?

I assume you are referring to visual artists. I'd have to say that my father probably was the strongest influence, although the themes I pursue are quite different from most of his art. He was the one whose drawing I admired most. His precision in seeing and mixing colors was, I think, passed on to me. [When I was too young to know the name for the color purple, I nevertheless perceived that it was red and blue mixed and described it that way to my parents when I was barely able to speak.]

However, I have absorbed the sight of so much art over the six decades of my life that I have to recognize influence from certain artistic "heroes." Dali's painting outside the box while still maintaining the technique of a craftsman really impressed me. I am also touched in a very visceral way by many modern sculptural works. There is real joy in regarding the flight inherent in the work of people like the Bennett twins. The heart soars on the same trajectory as the sculpture when it is done properly. Likewise, I am delighted by the quirky questions that arise out of Elon Ebanks' sculptures. They make my mind skip along like an 8 year old on the way home from school. I couldn't begin to list all the artists and types of art that influence me in some way.

What artists' work really "touches you?"

I have been "touched" by the work of many artists over my life-time. I enjoy things as diverse as the Impressionists and Aboriginal art. My tastes are eclectic and sometimes surprise even me. For instance, although I find much of the 19th and early 20th century art to be so sentimental as to

make me uncomfortable, I am in awe of Bouguereau's ability to plumb a deeper dimension in a mere depiction of one or two humans. This is a mystery I have not been able to fathom, despite my having gazed deeply and lengthily at his works.

What impresses you about other artists?

Courage to put your silly self up front and let people criticize if they want.

What insights did your father, a classically trained oil painter and art restorer, bring to you about art and how that shows up in your works?

Over the years as I was growing up my father taught me a number of useful or just interesting things about art. Some of them are more useful than others. For instance, he told me on more than one occasion that there are no straight lines in nature. I began testing that premise and found it to be, in the main, accurate. That may explain my interest in the formation of organic patterns. If you examine them, you can see that a few simple basic shapes make up everything. Recognizing that is what makes using fractal shapes so endlessly entertaining. You can reproduce an actual scene, and you will, necessarily, be using fractal shapes. But if you abstract the fractals out of the natural scene, you can achieve new organisms that breathe with life.

My Dad's graphic demonstrations showed me how to find a true complementary to any color and suggested the reason why complementary colors work as they do. Our sight needs balance just as everything else in life needs it. Saturating your vision with a strong hue causes your eyes to seek its opposite for a rest.

He taught me that the basic shape of a tree will usually mimic its smaller shapes, e.g., a maple tree, from a distance, will take the shape of the maple leaves; an apple tree will take the shape of an apple. When you examine that, it suggests a coherence that is fascinating. It also suggests how interesting it can be when a tree grows in an alien pattern for some reason.

When you are not sculpting, where can people find you? Most likely doing what?

I assume you're asking about things I'd choose to do for enjoyment, rather than, for example, housekeeping tasks, which we all have to do. I'd probably be reading – I read voraciously and have since I was about 6 or 7. But my range of interests is very broad and I might be viewing a drama, absorbing the peace of my garden, listening to music, playing pinball. Who knows?

That's it for now. If you have any questions of your own, just visit us at <http://www.whimofiron.com>.